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ABSTRACT

Most constructive critics of education agree that today's students are better than any in United States history. Yet problems like competency shortages and outmoded curricula remain. When schools were basically "socializers" (1885-1957), praise outstripped criticism--until 1957's Sputnik. In response, Congress initiated the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), passed the National Defense Education Act, and the National Science Foundation granted graduate scholarships by the thousands. By the sixties confidence in schools was again high. Meanwhile critics like Goodman and Holt began to use words like "stifling," and a new reaction was underway. Open classrooms in open-designed buildings replaced interest in traditional cognitive skills. The result was an outcry from back-to-basics proponents. At the same time integration of minorities was slow, while private schools multiplied. Finally, city school enrollment plummeted as urban areas became largely black, lower-class, and more violence-prone. Frightened teachers of all races left the profession. Such factors may be viewed in two ways: Large metropolitan school districts face closure by 1999. Inner cities go first and the incoming poor create the same problems for suburban and rural districts that caused inner-city collapse. Conversely, education leaders begin now to fight for schools' revitalization by implementing survival conditions ranging from equitable resource allocations to system-renewal strategies, and illiteracy vanishes by 1999. (KS)

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# "What's Wrong With Our Schools? Malaise and the American Educational System"

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Speech prepared for the opening session of the Sam B. Rayburn Symposium at East Texas State University, April 7, 1981

Criticism of education has become almost a national pastime. Few, if any, institutions of American life are subject to as careful scrutiny and intensive criticism as the schools. Critics range all the way from competent, sober, thoughtful, constructive persons who are sincerely interested in improving the system to carping, incompetent, irrational and sometimes vicious propagandists. Among the latter group are some who wish to destroy or, at best, severely circumscribe public education. Most of this group have no difficulty explaining what they oppose but they have great difficulty explaining what they are for. The constructive critic on the other hand, asks questions, tries to understand positions contrary to his own, seeks improvement through study and fact finding, works through proper channels, and uses rational and objective language.

Most of the constructive critics agree that today's students overall tend to be better writers, better spellers, better historians, better mathematicians, better readers, than any other group of students in the history of our nation. We take pride that our schools rank number one among all countries on the basis of 15-18 year olds in school; our students are still competitive in international competition in literary achievement, reading comprehension, math and science; we have produced 160 nobel prize winners to England's 73 and Russia's 14; and finally, the first 25 astronauts assigned to lunar missions were public school graduates. Also, recent studies have discovered that title I compensatory programs of the 60's and 70's really did have significant positive residual effects on deprived students.

In spite of past accomplishments there is a growing uneasiness about the

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American Educational system. There are students who cannot read and are socially promoted, curricula which emphasize the past and ignore the 21st century, teachers who can't teach, universities which certify incompetent warm bodies for teaching and administrative roles, a growing shortage of academically able and dedicated teachers with specialities in math, science, languages and industrial/vocational skills, who seek better paying and higher status positions. Approximately 25% of all teachers must moonlight in order to pay the grocery bills and the gas company. They have long given up on the ski trip or other forms of fun that other professionals can afford. In 1979 the average public school teacher earned $15,887, well below the nation's median family income of $19,684. There are children who are abused. . . not merely paddled, and teachers and students are regularly assaulted in the classrooms and hallways.

Like most of our other public institutions, schools have been slow to respond to social changes. A few school leaders have squandered their resources, abused their public trust and have hidden the sad statistics of low achievement and poor instruction from the patrons.

Public schools have always faced major obstacles and criticism. No period of time has been easy, but some periods have been easier than others. The easiest period for public education was from 1885 to 1957. These best of times started late in the nineteenth century when the schools were America's socializers. Immigration from Europe was increasing at a rapid rate. Industrial growth and consequent migration from the farms to the cities was also increasing. Public education was the institution designed to fit these immigrants into the mainstream of American life. However, for all practical purposes the praise heard for public schools in assimilating minority and culturally different groups was drowned out in the late 50's by the loud cries of the critics who blamed our socializing, student-centered, public schools for losing the science and space race with Russia. When the Russians fired Sputnik I into orbit in 1957, many Americans screamed,

"What's wrong with our schools."

Arthur E. Bestor, then a professor of history at the University of Illinois, argued that the public schools had failed because of life-adjustment education, which was promoted by educationists in schools and colleges of education, and a lack of academic rigor in separate subjects and academic discipline. Like Bestor, Admiral Hyman G. Rickover, a nuclear submarine expert, was quick to criticize the schools. Rickover was critical of a supposed neglect of science and math and warned that America could not remain a leader of nations unless its scientific and mathematical training was vastly upgraded. He rejected the child-centered school and lifted up one with strict discipline and rigorous academic standards, "like the European schools."

In response to the criticism from academics and to the national alarm that the Russians were beating us in space exploration, Congress initiated the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), which in a short time landed men on the moon. That same year a National Defense Education Act (NDEA) was passed by Congress to advance the teaching of science, math, and modern languages. Moreover, the National Science Foundation (NSF) was instrumental in returning thousands of science and math teachers to college, providing scholarships for graduate study which would prepare them to produce a generation of scientists to maintain national security and to win the Cold War. Another effort to ensure scientific supremacy was led by James B. Conant. He claimed that most high schools were too small to provide necessary scientific and technical education. He called for and got comprehensive high schools which concentrated large numbers of students, faculty and equipment.

During these late 1950's, when a rising tide of postwar Baby-Boom youngsters came to school at the rate of 1 million a year, school buildings were FOK, "full of kids." TV commentator Edward R. Murrow lamented that we have become a "have not" nation. "We have-not enough teachers...We have-not 340,000 classrooms." He

described schools using army barracks and grim pre-fabs to overcome classroom shortages. In 1957, the expansion was especially acute in the secondary schools. High school enrollment increased by 14 percent over 1956. New elementary and secondary schools were built to accomodate the larger number of students, and bond issues were passed to expand and improve facilities. Total school expenditures for schools rose from $6 billion in 1950 to over $40 billion by 1970.

In the early 1960's confidence in the public schools to accomplish any mission that might be assigned was high. It was believed that if the schools had prepared us to win WWII and to catch the Russians in space, then surely the schools could erase all of social ills in America. The schools had been called upon to arrest alcohol and drug abuse, reduce highway carnage, combat veneral disease, reduce unemployment, entertain the public with sports, music and drama, produce wise consumers, and conduct charitable drives. Almost any problem in society was viewed as "an educational problem" and people turned to the schools expecting instant success. Thus, the schools became both the scapegoat for the ills of society and the source of hope for their cure. People often failed to realize that just as the schools were only a part of the cause of these complex problems, so they could be only a part of the cure. As one popular magazine noted: television stations of one city carried, in one week, 7,887 acts of violence. One episode of a western series garnished Christmas night with thirteen homicides. According to Neil Postman, Professor of Communications Arts and Sciences, at New York University, in an interview in the January 19, 1981 U.S. News and World Report,..."Between the ages of 6 and 16 the average child spends roughly 15,000 to 16,000 hours in front of a television set, whereas school probably consumes no more than 13,000 hours." Also, Education was thought to be the path to economic opportunity for the poor and the minorities--if they completed the 12th grade. An entrenched educational establishment, armed with large sums of federal dollars, saw a chance to gain professional status and

made bold promises to make the public schools havens of equal opportunity for blacks, Hispanics and the poor. Their incredibly naive idealism promised to educate and blend them at the same time. They reasoned that if the schools could receive praise from the American people for leading a "techofix" then a "socio-fix" could follow.

Kids were everywhere and funding for education was never better. These were the years for compensatory programs full of promise for all disadvantaged urban children--"Upward Bound," and "Headstart" were two of the largest. While dreams of building a "Great Society" danced in the heads of many educators, the critics were readying their attack. These critics, led by writers--Goodman, Kozol, Holt, and other social reformers and romantics, labeled the public schools dismal failures. They wrote of the uncaring, stifling, deadening, dream-killing places that taught a mindless subservience to teachers and administrators who were distorting American values. Public schools, according to Jonathan Kozol, were causing for children "death at an early age." The attacks were heightened by the newspaper and weekly news magazines. The growing public concern about uncaring teachers in bleak classrooms turned the dreams of educational leaders into nightmares.

In response to the criticism, education planners initiated programs to change the schools from boring drill and practice to open classrooms, free-schools, small group discussions about values and personal growth. The schools were going to be fun for kids--places they could enjoy and where they could "do their own thing." Open-design elementary and secondary school buildings were built all over America. Walls were torn away within old school structures to make room for large group, small group, and individualized instruction areas. Teachers were offered workshops in sensitivity training and team teaching as federal dollars kept coming to assure the success of the new "humanistic learning

environment."

These new child-centered schools appeased the most vocal critics for a few years. Analyzing learning environments and "affective" curriculum components filled the education journals. Because we wanted humane schools, there was little mention and less stress on traditional cognitive skills. Social science researchers were analyzing the variables of self-concept, stressing values clarification and other factors which made schools happy places to be.

While these experiments in humanism were being conducted, the standardized testing people and the accountability watchdogs were at work. "Test scores were slipping," they said. Other charges were the basics were not being taught, the Great Society school programs designed to remedy the effects of poverty were not working, test results were showing that the significant gains achieved with preschool children in Headstart, the leader of the compensatory movement, were washed out by the second or third grade and the final big charge--SAT scores were growing worse each year and the colleges were complaining about the poor quality of entering freshmen. Proponents of "back to the basics" started their chant while school leaders stood with a puzzled look. While the educators stood in dismay, they viewed another disappointing development. Integration was not working. Integration, as both an educational and social tool, was in deep trouble. The contradictory and controversial reports by James Coleman on the educational impact of the integration of black and white children heightened emotions. Even though the Civil Rights Act of 1964 included a provision barring the use of federal funds for segregated programs and schools, progress had been slow and painful. But progress did come, <u>at least in numbers</u>. By the mid 1970's only 12 percent of black students in the United States were in completely segregated schools. Many blacks wanted their children integrated into superior white schools, other blacks cried out for separate but equal neighborhood schools. To compound the problem, the growth of private schools had been dramatic since 1955. In most

instances, white parents initiated church-related schools to ensure that their children received a "quality" education. These private academies, unlike many of the older, well-established schools, ranged in quality from poor to excellent.

In 1980 many observers of racial balance efforts claimed that more than 20 years of litigation and writing about school desegregation issues and the continuing commitment of private and government civil rights groups to racial balance was obsolete policy.

The United States Senate made big waves in November of 1980 with a Senate bill. This controversial bill was designed to bar the Justice Department from spending money to file desegregation suits that would require the transportation of healthy children to any school but the one nearest their home. Several civil rights leaders and liberal Senators called for President Jimmy Carter to veto the bill because they claimed that the anti-busing rider attached to that legislation would totally undermine enforcement of civil rights protections against school discrimination. The Senate decided late in 1980 to lay the issue aside for the new administration of Republican Ronald Reagan to wrestle with in 1981.

And while the arguments about busing and human rights were conducted in high places, the cities of America decayed and struggled. During the 60's and 70's the urban areas became largely black and lower-class with rapidly declining school enrollments. The situation has been exacerbated by declining white birth rates and the first signs of a leveling off in black birth rates. Education planners in the cities began struggling with the problems of decline. Administrators in these schools, faced with the abrupt loss of over 500,000 children, have closed schools with small enrollments, laid-off personnel and cut back services to the bare bones, as a result of inflation and antiquated state finance formulas. Thus, the urban metropolises in 1981 are older and poorer, infected with high crime rates, drug traffic, school vandalism and violence. Experienced

teachers are leaving the profession, frightened by the troubled children of the cities, suburbs, and rural areas and salaries too low to support themselves, much less a family. The flight from the cities is made by black, Hispanic and white if they can afford the trip. As Marvin Katzman, professor at the University of Texas at Dallas, said in 1979, "It's happening everywhere. blacks and other minorities, when they become affluent, want the same things whites want." The vital signs of life in the urban schools are growing weak in the spring of 1981 and forecasters are predicting that they will not recover.

Now, I will offer two brief scenarios of American Education beginning now and ending in 1999. The first scenario is based on simple trend extrapolation, or business as usual, and makes doomsday look good. The second scenario offers glimpses of what could be if we begin today to fix the future.

The large metropolitan school districts, by the year 1999, will either be closed or gasping for breath. The sunbelt districts will be the last to go but the consequences will be disastrous. In 1980, 27% or 60,000,000 people lived in the inner cities with 40% or 89,000,000 in the suburbs. Thus, 67% of the population resides in the metropolitan areas of America. The inner city districts will probably collapse first, sending waves of minority and poor children into the suburban and rural districts. This invasion could bring the same problems that caused the inner city collapse. Among these problems are:

- Inadequate financing (state funding formulas) will continue for necessary programs. Several districts in other states have eliminated sports, music, etc.
- Experienced, qualified teachers will resign in droves as a result of low pay and unmotivated, undisciplined and often violent students. In 1979 more than 50% of all arrests were of youths under 25 - 25% were under 18.
- Aging communities will refuse to hear of any tax increase or vote for bond issues. They have "raised their kids" and refuse to raise anyone else's. They will be more interested in police and fire protection.

- School board members will be the powerless, less prominent people who care, but have little influence.
- Drop out rates will reach 40%. It was 23% in 1979 with 35% for blacks and 45% for Hispanics.
- Industry will flee the older suburbs and take the better high technology jobs with them leaving only a few low skill jobs for thousands of workers.
- Many school leaders will hang on, facing impossible odds brought on by tax credits for families who choose to send their children to private schools. Teacher unions will make impossible demands, and industry will refuse to help a lost cause.
- Learning technologies (computers, cable TV, word processing equipment) will be refused the teacher and students because of the high costs.
- Universities will place even less emphasis on teacher and administrator education because of the low status of public education, colleges of education, and educators.
- State and national student minimum competency tests pushed for political reasons will cause most teachers and administrators to give up trying to touch their students' higher cognitive processes. They will merely try to meet state minimum competency requirements at various levels. Teachers and administrators will be evaluated according to the percentage of students who pass these tests. As a result of this systems approach, educators will adopt a belief that "these kids really can't learn." A final, fatal blow to the American education system.

And now for a second opinion.

(Joke) Ugly - dictionary definition.

Faced with gloomy forecasts in 1981 for school failure and collapse, educational leaders in all university disciplines, state agencies, public schools, and school boards will take the initiative and fight for the schools' survival. These leaders know that effective response to the problems of school management occasioned by changing and declining enrollments, low student achievement, family and community disorganization, and other more disturbing conditions will require the best scholarship and policies at all levels of education and government. They know that local citizens and school boards must be informed about the nature

and magnitude of the problems. State legislatures will have to be led by political scientists and others to actively seek to reform school finance enactments, and Congress and corporations will have to be urged to make funds available to help improve the quality of life and educational services offered to revitalize the schools and attract businesses and families back into the city.

These leaders must encourage their brightest to enter education and university scholars and administrators must all contribute to the development of these teachers who will shape the world of the 21st century. University professors in the sciences, humanities and professions must combine efforts to prepare teachers with the same commitment as they have for preparing engineers, poets and business leaders.

These leaders, many of whom are in this audience, will strive to accomplish the following four essential conditions for a successful revitalization of the public school system. They are:

1. An equitable allocation of finance and resources
2. Change from a past-oriented to a futures-focused curriculum
3. Utilization of the total community environment
4. System-renewal strategies

1. An equitable allocation of resources. Leaders, you and I, will have to help revamp school finance formulas and policies for public schools. Also, we must work to develop such innovative plans as encouraging owners of professional football, baseball, basketball and hockey teams to agree to help their urban area schools by contributing a small percentage of all ticket sales over the next 15 years to the general school fund. Another fund could be a national "save the schools" network supported by the major oil corporations. The corporations could agree to underwrite all of the news media efforts to promote the network. They would present a story of urgency in saving the public schools in a vivid and accurate style on cable, commercial, and educational video screens throughout America. The oil giants could join the schools' leaders and agree that unless

our children are educated now, society will be the loser later. They may reason that it is "pay me now or pay me later."

The coalition of leaders must work through national and state professional organizations to promote Federal legislation similar to PL94-142, The Education of All Handicapped Children Act. The bill, Incentives for Educating Urban Children Act, could pass, requiring the State Department of Education to channel 5% more (categorical) education dollars for every student with special needs. These additional funds plus the city school tax placed upon suburban dwellers living in the same county but in different school districts will prove to be controversial but equitable and could provide the monetary base for metropolitan school success.

2. Change from a past-oriented to a future-focused curriculum. The schools will strive to base learning experiences on the question of "what knowledge and skills will be of most use to students now and in the future?" The greatest single belief will be that children can learn. Benjamin Bloom (1976), Bill Spady (1980) and others have since the 1960's and 70's preached mastery learning and outcome-based education, but after 1981 most school districts and universities will embrace the two powerfully successful notions. Mastery learning has as its basic premise that all students (even those in the ghetto) given time and the right learning conditions are capable of learning well.

3. Utilization of the total community environment. The school leaders will take advantage of the rich educational offerings of the community environment in order to close the gap between schooling and out-of-school experience. These opportunities will include, among others, learning-oriented employment, volunteer or internship experience in health services, industry, businesses, museums, social and cultural agencies. Each school board and administrator will solicit parents, retirees, community leaders and citizens to assist in making educational policy about the use of school facilities, learning experiences and school-community cooperative activities. An educator will help others realize human potential -

one who helps others shape beliefs, aspirations and values within the cultural context. Educators, therefore, will be media experts, community leaders, politicians, business executives, parents, the clergy, engineers, and teachers. Linking these and other groups together to discuss major goals and problems we have in common will be a major step in educating the public to take control over their futures. The concept of community education growing out of the "school as community" concept of the early 1900's and later made possible through support of the Mott Foundation will become a reality in all districts. The "community education" dream will finally be realized in the early 1990's. Programs for all ages will be offered to make lifelong learning a way of life. Support for the schools will improve; vandalism and crime rates will decrease; drop-outs will be practically non-existent because of the close working relationship between schools, families, and businesses which will offer part-time work/study opportunities for all students who desire them. Also, the schools will arrange 6 a.m. - 6 p.m. child care programs for working parents. The major overhaul of the schools, aided by support from the total community environment will make urban ghettos safer and will produce a more reliable labor force. High technology industries will return to the inner core of the cities bringing with them families and community stability. The urban areas and the schools will have improved dramatically by 1993.

4. System-renewal strategies. Several major legislature developments in the mid-1980's will prove to be instrumental in school systems renewal. A proposed voucher plan bill will be declared unconstitutional because it would have permitted public funds to be used to support parochial and private schools. Also, a tax credit bill will fail for the same basic reasons. The bills will not pass because this would further fragment society and completely undermine the struggling public school districts.

State legislatures will substantially increase teacher salaries and support for colleges of education who will have gained the support and professional

commitment from the other colleges and disciplines vital to teacher and administrator education. These increases which will show renewed public confidence in schools and in teacher education will cut the teacher shortage and will help provide vastly improved pre-service and in-service training for educators. These developments to elevate public educators to truly professional status will diminish the power of unionism to the point that the education profession will organize into one group which may be called The American Education Association. This powerful group will no longer need the union label. State legislators and governors will be convinced that educators have earned high status and salaries, and the right to determine the core curriculum based on sound professional judgements.

The American Education Association will place as its number one priority school systems renewal. It could influence school districts to implement a "future" learning environment for the 21st century. The 21st century model will consist of three major components: 1) operations center, 2) inner learning environment, and 3) outer learning environment. The plan consists of heavy reliance on participatory democracy and instant-information computers, cable TV, and pocket-sized portable dators which combine features of CB radios, computers and the telephone system. The system will institute small and large group learning sessions as well as one-on-one tutoring and counseling. Race, sex, age and different learning abilities and styles will no longer separate people in this rich, personalized learning environment. Educators finally convinced the public and state legislature that it was unreasonable to expect the education system to eradicate economic inequality or racial injustice. However, it <u>was</u> reasonable to see that the surest long-term antidote to poverty and discrimination is a lot of learning. Schools, the educators said, may not be able to heal the psychic wounds of a family break-up or stop teenage pregnancies, but they surely could enable our children to become literate through good teaching,

hard work, and planning. The stage was then set for the momentuous announcement, in May of 1999, that the American education system had eliminated illiteracy. The possibilities for the American public school system in the 21st century were astounding.